A CROSS-CULTURE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN US AND CHINESE ORGANIZATIONS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND COMMUNICATION IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Approved: [Signature] 
Date: June 8, 2009

Paper Advisor
A cross-culture comparative analysis between US and Chinese organizations of Conflict Management in Organizational Behavior and Communication in Project Management

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Project Management

By

Yang Fan

2009
Abstract

The US and China are two countries of great significance on the world stage. In recent years, the two countries have improved their cooperation in various fields, particularly in business. Both the frequency and importance of cross-cultural contact between these two countries are unprecedented. On the other hand, these two countries differ so dramatically that conflict potential during communication between members of the two cultures is surprisingly high. This seminar paper will be based on prior research about culture, conflict, cross-culture and conflict management in the US and China. It will then focus on investigating the differences in conflict management styles between the personnel in the two countries determining the relevant cultural aspects underpinning these differences.
A cross-culture comparative analysis between US and Chinese organizations of Conflict Management in Organizational Behavior and Communication in Project Management

Introduction

Communication is one of the most important, sophisticated and ubiquitous human activities. It is the basis for effective leadership, decision making and management of interpersonal conflict in organizations. When we communicate, we implicitly or explicitly express different values, attitudes, and beliefs, and hold the assumptions of the cultures within which we have been socialized and which are reflected in our likes and dislikes (Shi, 2003). Because of these factors, resulting from diversified cultural and individual differences, conflicts are inevitable during the process of communication. Conflict potentials are expected to be higher in cross-cultural communications which involve people from different cultural backgrounds. There is a potential for many misunderstandings and conflicts between the personnel from different counties particularly when the countries have significant cultural differences.

Review of Literature

Culture

Hofstede’s definition of the word “Culture” is very broad. “Culture is the collective
Differences between the US and Chinese Conflict Management in Project Management

programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1994). As Samovar and Porter said, culture is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, all pervasive, and difficult to define, because it has so many functions, such as history, religion, values, social organization and language. Harrison and Huntington noted, “The term culture, of course, has had multiple meanings in different disciplines and different contexts.” (Harrison and Huntington, Culture Matters). Kroeber and Kluckhohn listed 164 definitions of culture found in anthropology literature. Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply put, “culture” refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. It also includes groups we join or become part of. For example, we can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly, we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

“Culture is like a kind of software in mind. A person’s thinking pattern, feeling, and acting are programmed by it.” (Hofstede, 1997) During the past several decades, many anthropologists, social psychologists, and communication scholars have carried out research to find out how culture influences individual experiences and behaviors. Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions are probably one of the best-known approaches to provide systematic and measurable aspects of culture. He has surveyed over a hundred thousand workers on work goals and values in subsidiaries of IBM in 53 nations and regions. After careful analysis, he divided culture into four dimensions: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity-femininity. It is worthwhile to point out that the following
descriptions refer to the extreme poles of each dimension. In reality, most countries are somewhere between.

a) Individualism-Collectivism

For many years, researchers have held that self orientation versus collective orientation is one of the basic pattern variables that determines human action. Even today, as Ting-Toomey points out, “Individualistic and collective value tendencies are manifested in everyday family, school, and workplace interactions.” (Ting-Toomey, 1999) According to Hofstede, “Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism, as its opposite, pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” (Hofstede, 1997)

In collectivistic cultures, people are born into extended families or other groups, which continue to protect them in exchange for loyalty. They tend to think in terms of “we” identity and take the in-group goals prior to personal goals. In these cultures, harmony should be maintained and direct confrontation should be avoided in interpersonal communication. In collectivistic organizations, self-effacement in the interest of the group is quite normal. Relationships between employer and employee are perceived in moral terms, like a family link. People tend to think that relationships prevail over task. Actually, management manages groups in collectivistic societies. On the other hand, in individualistic cultures, people are expected to look after only themselves and their immediate family after reaching maturity. They are more likely to think in terms of “I” identity and give priority to personal goals and
needs. In companies of this culture, relationships between employer and employee are based on mutual interests. Employees want their opinions and ideas heard, while employers are willing to listen to and consult with their employees. Employees are free to move around instead of remaining in a company for a long time. Reward is linked to an individual’s performance. People tend to think that task prevails over relationship. Management is management of individuals. While both collectivism and individualism exist in all cultures to some degree, people in different cultures view the world through different lenses, speaking and acting accordingly.

b) Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance “defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truths.” (Hofstede, 1997) Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance feel the uncertainty inherent in life as a continuous threat that must be fought. Generally speaking, they do not bear higher stress and tend to have anxiety over the unpredictable future or ambiguity. As a result, they try to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity by providing stability for their members with the help of technology, law, and religion. People of this culture are unwilling to tolerate deviant ideas and behaviors, instead, they would rather seek consensus and believe in absolute truths. Strong uncertainty avoidance is manifested in companies as follows: formal organizational structure is established; many formal laws and informal rules are needed to regulate the rights and duties of employers and employees; precision and punctuality are stressed; people like to work hard and live a busy life. By contrast, people in
low uncertainty avoidance societies more easily accept the uncertainty in life and seldom feel being threatened by different ideas. They dislike the hierarchical structure and formal rules which are thought to be established only in case of absolute necessity. They are more willing to take risks and value being initiative and flexible. As a whole, members of low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures are less tense and more relaxed.

c) Power Distance

Power distance can be defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”. (Hofstede, 1997) It is reflected in the values of the less powerful members of society as well as in those more powerful members. People in high power distance countries accept the power and authority as facts of life. They are taught, both consciously and unconsciously, that people are not equal. Each person has his/her own place in the hierarchical society. Those at the top naturally are more powerful than those at the bottom. At the workplace, both superiors and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal; power centralization is thought to be normal in organizations; subordinates expect to be told exactly what to do; wide salary gaps exist between supervisors and subordinates; supervisors are entitled to privileges and status symbols; the ideal boss in such a society is a benevolent autocrat. In low-power-distance cultures, people behave to the contrary. They hold that inequalities among people should be minimized. To them, a hierarchy is an inequality of roles established for convenience. In organizations, centralization of power is frowned upon; the salary gap between top and bottom of organization is narrow; subordinates expect to be consulted before decision-making; the ideal boss should possess the qualities of being
resourceful and democratic.

d) Masculinity and Femininity

The idea of masculinity and femininity does not refer to men and women. It implies the degree to which masculine or feminine characteristics are valued in a society. “Masculinity pertains to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct (i.e., men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life); femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap i.e., both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.” (Hofstede, 1997) Cultures that value masculinity are male-oriented. In these cultures, children are raised to be competitive, ambitious, and assertive. Men are expected to take career advancement, pursuing power and money as their goals in life. Being decisive and assertive are the major requirements for good managers. Organizations place emphasis on results and reward, everyone according to his performance. There is a feeling that conflicts should be resolved by fight in masculine cultures. On the contrary, people in feminine societies emphasize caring and nurturing traits. The distinction between gender roles is not so evident. Children in these countries are taught to be modest and cohesive. Both men and women are supposed to be tender and to be concerned with relationships. Managers tend to use intuition in the decision-making process. Compromise and negotiation are thought to be ideal ways to resolve conflicts.

Conflict

Conflict is considered a state of disagreement or argument between two opposing parties
or ideas. In his seminars, Ting-Toomey explains that conflict is “a form of interpersonal or intrapersonal tension between two or more parties based on goals, needs, desires, values, beliefs, and/or attitudes” (Ting-Toomey, 1985). Robbins develops the definition of conflict as “a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affects, something that the first party cares about” (Robbins, 1998). Richard Hughes claims in his book “conflict occurs when two opposing parties have interests or goals that appear to be incompatible” (Hughes, 1999).

An organization is classically defined as “an open system, which exists over a longer period of time, pursues specific goals, consists of groups of individuals and has a certain structure, which is mostly characterized by division of labor and hierarchy of responsibilities” (Albanese & Van Fleet, 1983). An organization provides a specific context for behaviors. It holds particular characteristics that certain kinds of behavior are more expected in organizations than others (Robbins, 2001). Moreover, interaction in organizations typically occurs between colleagues, among whom there exists a certain degree of distance. While dealing with problematic issues, individuals are expected to rely more on habituated modes of conflict resolution than in other situations, such as intimate relationships or situations with less time limitations (Ting-Toomey, 2000). Therefore, it should be noted that since this paper focuses on conflict within a company, a type of organization, all outcomes of conflict perceptions and behaviors in this study may not apply to other contexts. When discussing conflict management, the company framework is assumed.

There are generally five resolution styles which can be called “the five-style model”. There are widely used by researchers to study conflict management in an intercultural
environment (Ting-Toomey, 1991). Rahim (1983) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979) conceptualized the styles of handling interpersonal conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. Further, their model classifies conflict management into five distinct styles: integrating style, obliging style, dominating style, avoiding style, and compromising style.

a) Integrating Style (win-win)

This style indicates high concern for self and others. We can also say that this style reflects an equal concern for self and others. This style is also known as problem solving. It involves collaboration between the parties (i.e., openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach a solution acceptable to both parties). “The first rule…for obtaining integration is to put your cards on the table, face the real issue, uncover the conflict, bring the whole thing into the open” (Follett, 1940). Gray (1989) describes this as collaboration — “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision for what is possible”. Prein (1976) suggested that this style has two distinctive elements: confrontation and problem solving. Confrontation involves open communication, clearing up misunderstanding, and analyzing the underlying causes of conflict. This is a prerequisite for problem solving, which involves identification of, and solution to, the real problem to provide maximum satisfaction of concerns of both parties.

b) Obliging Style (lose-win)

This style indicates low concern for self and high concern for others. This is also known as accommodating. This is associated with attempting to play down the differences and
Differences between the US and Chinese Conflict Management in Project Management

emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. There is an element of self-sacrifice in this style. It may take the form of selfless generosity, charity, or obedience to another party’s order. An obliging person neglects his or her own concern to satisfy the concern of the other party. Such an individual is like a “conflict absorber,” that is, a “person whose reaction to a perceived hostile act on the part of another has low hostility or even positive friendliness” (Rahim, 2001).

c) Dominating Style (win-lose)

This style indicates high concern for self and low concern for others. This is also known as competing. This style has been identified with a win-lose orientation or with forcing behavior to win one’s position. A dominating or competing person goes all out to win his or her objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party. Dominating may mean standing up for one’s rights and/or defending a position that the party believes to be correct. Sometimes a dominating person wants to win at any cost. A dominating supervisor is likely to use his or her position of power to impose his or her will on the subordinates and command their obedience. A person who does not possess formal position power may wield power by deceit, bluff, bringing in superiors, and so on (Rahim, 2001).

d) Avoiding Style (lose-lose)

This style indicates low concern for self and others. This style is also known as suppression. It has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, sidestepping, or “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” situations (Rahim, 2001). It may take the form of postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawal from a threatening situation. An avoiding
person fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern for the other party. This style is often characterized as a careless attitude toward the issues or parties involved in conflict. Such a person may refuse to acknowledge in public that there is a conflict that should be dealt with.

e) Compromising Style (even)

This style indicates intermediate concern for self and others. It involves give-and-take or sharing whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean splitting the difference, exchanging concession, or seeking a quick, middle-ground position (Rahim, 2001). A compromising party gives up more than a dominating party but less than an obliging party. Likewise, such a party addresses an issue more directly than an avoiding party but does not explore it in as much depth as an integrating party. As Rahim (2001) notes, these five interpersonal conflict management styles can be reclassified according to the terminologies of game theory. Integrating style can be reclassified to a positive-sum on nonzero-sum (win-win) style, compromising to a mixed (no-win/no-lose) style, and obliging, dominating, and avoiding to zero-sum or negative-sum (lose-win, win-lose, and lose-lose, respectively) styles.

When people from different cultures engage in conflict, they often have different expectations for how the conflict should be handled due to different cultural norms and values held. Cross-cultural conflict therefore often starts with different expectations concerning appropriate or inappropriate conflict behavior in a conflict scene. Each cultural group has a unique pattern in the relationship between individuals’ cultural orientations and preference for conflict resolution styles. It is now widely construed that cultures differ in the
world and therefore the preferences for conflict resolutions methods vary. Culture is one of the major factors that influence conflict management styles (Ting-Toomey, 1991). Cultural context may determine how conflict management styles are selected and used. For instance, whereas organizational members from individualistic cultures may select dominating or compromising to resolve their interpersonal conflict, organizational members from collectivistic cultures may select and use integrating and avoiding for managing this conflict. This is not a groundless claim.

Ting-Toomey’s (1991) cross-cultural study provided evidence to this conclusion. In addition, the conflict face-negotiation theory of Ting-Toomey proposed a link between the cultural variability, face management processes and conflict communication styles. It suggests that people from individualistic cultures will choose either dominating and compromising or the integrating styles more often for managing interpersonal conflicts. These styles reflect a solution-oriented approach or a need for control of choice, further they require a direct approach to solve the problem. On the other hand, a sense of belonging to the group or the approval of the group is very important for people in collectivistic cultures. Collectivists will either avoid confrontation or will try to oblige the other person and would thus tend to use an obliging or an avoiding style to handle the conflict (Gilani, 1999).

**Different Cultures in the US and China**

In 1987, the Chinese Culture Connection conducted a survey regarding Chinese values. In this research, they found four dimensions of cultural values that influence Chinese organizational life. They are integration, moral discipline, human-heartedness, and Confucian
dynamism. Of these four dimensions, the first three are similar to Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism, power distance, and masculinity-feminity respectively. Only the Confucian dynamism has no correlation with any of Hofstede’s dimensions. The Chinese Culture Connection argues that it is this dimension that distinguishes the cultural orientation between Western and Eastern countries. It is commonly believed that nations possess certain cultural roots that are resistant to change. Confucianism, rooted in the teaching of Confucius (around 500B.C), has deeply affected and will continue to affect Chinese people’s lives. It is the cornerstone of Chinese culture and basis of Chinese beliefs and thoughts. A complete review of Confucianism is beyond the scope of this article. This study will focus on some key themes in Confucianism about collectivity, the family, and interpersonal values that are more closely related to conflict handling behaviors in companies.

Confucian values provide the primary basis for collective characteristics of Chinese society. In a Confucian society, the meaning of a person’s life is defined by the community he or she belongs to. The individual is insignificant without community. The interests of the collective, e.g. family, group, organization, or the whole society, always precede the interests of any individual. The most important concept “Ren”, which is the basis for other Confucian virtues, has a very strong collective orientation. It “encourages self-sacrifice for the good of others and community, self-restraints in pursuing one’s personal interests, and self-effacement when interacting with the other people” (Yum, 1997). The other important Confucian collective values are harmony and stability. They provide the basis for the survival and prosperity of any collective society. In Confucianism, harmony is the highest good. Without harmony, a family cannot stand, a community will break down, and a society will collapse.
Thus, personal activity should not disrupt harmonious social relationships or damage the underlying hierarchical social structure which supports all types of harmonious social relationships.

Confucian ideology advocates that the family is the prototype of all social organizations and that the basic unit of society is not the individual, but the family. Thus, the will of the individual is subordinated to that of the family group. In addition, a child is not an individual, but primarily a member of the family. Children are taught to control their individualism to maintain harmony in the family. The relationship between parents and children is one of the most emphasized relationships in Confucian philosophy. The parent-child relationship is a type of reciprocal relationship in which children serve their parents with filial piety and submission, and parents treat their children with kindness and care. Another Confucian family value, one of the five cardinal relationships, is about husband and wife. In general, wives are expected to show submission to husbands, and husbands are expected to show care and kindness to their wives. Harmony between a husband and wife is one of the ideal Confucian family values.

Outside of the family domain, two basic relationships exist: between the ruler and the ruled, and between friends. The first is a hierarchical relationship in which the ruled is expected to be obedient to the ruler, while the ruler is expected to be kind and caring to the ruled, almost like the relationship of father and son. This hierarchical relationship also extends to the superior and subordinate, employer and employee, teacher and student, etc. Trustworthiness is the most treasured virtue in the relationship between friends. In addition, the principle of precedence of the old over the young affects beyond family relationships.
This principle underscores age as a factor in organizing human relationships and setting up social hierarchy. Younger people should treat older people with respect under all circumstances, and give precedence to older people when conflict arises. However, such a relationship is also reciprocal. Older people should treat younger people with care and kindness. Gender, a governing principle of interaction between husbands and wives, also regulates interactive behaviors between men and women in general in a Confucian society, which requires women to be submissive and avoid direct conflict with men. Another golden rule is “in order to establish ourselves, we must help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge ourselves, we must help others to enlarge themselves.” Confucianism teaches that social and economic activities are not based on competition, but on the collectivist principles of cooperation, coexistence, and mutual support. A person is not viewed as being independent, but an integral part of a larger network of people that survives and succeeds together. Maintaining trusting relationships within the social network (Guān Xi) is vital. (Yum, 1997)

Some people claim that American culture is a “melting pot” culture, for this nation is composed of people from many countries and regions. With this mix, different cultural values and traits are brought together. Each culture tries to live in harmony with other cultures while maintaining its own identity. Among the various cultures existing in America, the dominant cultural patterns go to the white Anglo-Saxons. The American cultural traits could be attributed to the nature of the early immigrants who came to a new world and attempted to stake out a new life. On one hand, the vast lands of America represented lands of rich resources, promise, opportunity and freedom, which belonged to those of being first and hard-working. On the other hand, the wilderness of the unsettled land forced these
Differences between the US and Chinese Conflict Management in Project Management

immigrants to be self-reliant, tough, aggressive, optimistic toward changes, and to not easily
give up what they had claimed and owned. Therefore, individualism, self-reliance,
competition, and equality have perhaps been the values most closely associated with the
frontier heritage of Americans.

Equality which is emphasized in everything from government (everyone has the right to
vote) to social relationships (“Just call me by my first name”) is the basis of American society.
Americans believe that all people have equal rights which should be ensured by the state laws.
What is close to equality is the notion of independence held by Americans. Americans believe
that individuals must learn to rely on themselves, take care of themselves, solve their own
problems, take the responsibility for their actions, as well as “stand on their own two
feet”.(Xu, 1990)

Competition and Materialism: Competition is encouraged from early childhood.
Learning to be competitive is a vital part for growing-up in America. Americans are ranked,
classified, and evaluated so that everyone will know if they are the best ones. For most
Americans, people are judged by their material possessions. Materialism has always been an
integral part of life. They are eager to have convenient transportation, a large variety of foods
at their disposal, clothes for every occasion, and comfortable homes equipped with many
labor-saving devices. As the philosopher Lionel Trilling observed, “In the American
metaphysic, reality is always material reality.” (Samovar & Porter, 1995)

For many years, Americans have attached great importance to progress and change. Early
Americans cleared forests and conquered the wilderness in order to establish their country.
Today, from changing their personalities with the assistance of self-help gurus, to changing
where they live frequently, Americans appear to be dissatisfied with the status quo. They consider the society as a body of improvement, progress, and change. With such belief, American people tend to be optimistic toward change, be willing to take risks, and concentrate on the future rather than the past or present.

Cross-culture and Conflict Management

Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural values, especially individualism-collectivism have been extensively employed as a foundation to explain how cultural differences influence interpersonal communication behavior (i.e., conflict management, negotiation, etc.). According to Hofstede, members from individualistic cultures tend to be low-context, while members from collectivistic cultures tend to be high-context. The high context and low context theory is the cornerstone of Ting-Toomey’s theory of conflict and culture, which is one of the major theories that directly studies the relationship between culture and conflict.

According to Hall, “A high-context culture is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message; a low-context culture is just the opposite, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall, 1990). Generally speaking, low-context cultural members share similar behavior orientations as individualistic cultural members, whereas high-context cultural members share the same orientation with the collectivistic cultural members. Based on these assumptions, Ting-Toomey (1985) borrowed the concepts of instrumental and expressive conflicts from Oslen (1978) to explain how cultural members perceive, interpret, and manage conflicts. Instrumental conflict is featured by “opposing practices or goals”
Differences between the US and Chinese Conflict Management in Project Management

(Ting-Toomey, 1985) and expressive conflict is characterized by “desires for tension release from hostile feelings” (Ting-Toomey, 1985). In a conflict episode, people from high-context culture tend to view conflict as expressive, whereas people from low-context cultures are able to separate the conflict from the individuals involved in it. Accordingly, they usually adopt direct and confrontational styles to manage conflicts. On the other hand, members of high-context or collectivistic cultures are not able to separate the conflict from the individuals involved in it; thus, they usually adopt indirect, non-confrontational, and passive styles to manage conflicts.

Kozan’s framework on culture and conflict is based on Glen’s model of associative and abstractive cultural orientations. While the associative culture corresponds to high-context culture, the abstractive culture is similar to individualistic culture. His framework includes three distinctive models of conflict management, which are the harmony model, the confrontational model and the regulative model. He also categorized the conflict process into three stages: antecedent conditions, thoughts and emotions, and behaviors. Conflict management takes place at each stage in all three models. In the harmony model, cooperative behaviors are emphasized in order to handle conflict and face-saving are the major criteria used to judge the effectiveness. In the confrontational model, conflict is openly acknowledged; confrontation and compromise are employed to resolve conflict; fairness is the dominant standard for satisfactory conflict management. In the regulative model, bureaucratic means, like authoritative command, are generally used, and a due process is followed. (Shi, 2003)

Many researchers have studied the relationship between culture and conflict management,
from an intercultural perspective. Bond (1985) found that Chinese and Americans held
different attitudes towards the use of intermediaries in resolving a conflict. To resolve a
dispute, the collectivistic Chinese are more likely to prefer a separate meeting of the
conflicting parties, whereas individualistic Americans are more likely to hold a joint meeting
with all the conflicting parties to solve the problem mutually. Ting-Toomey (1991) studied
the conflict management styles of Taiwan Chinese and Americans. She found that the
Chinese were more obliging and avoiding than Americans in managing conflicts. And also,
Tse et.al (1994) found that the collectivistic Chinese were more likely to avoid conflicts than
Canadians and concluded that in managing conflict the Chinese are more concerned with
maintaining interpersonal relationships. In Chua and Gudykunst’s (1987) “Conflict resolution
style in low- and high-context cultures”, it found that subjects from high-context cultures
were more dependent on solution-oriented strategies than people from low-context cultures,
and people from low-context cultures were more non-confrontational than subjects from
high-context cultures. These cross-cultural studies have greatly contributed to our
understanding of how cultural forces influence conflict management. However, culture is
open to change, and as the world economy and the trend of globalization is developing, the
cultures of different nations are also changing. Therefore, it is necessary for us to further
study the relationship between culture and conflict management.

Cross-culture and Project Management

Culture promotes the development of management styles. Management is constrained by
culture. Each country forms their own management style based on the cultural backgrounds.
The management style refers to the guiding ideology of management, management philosophy, which includes values, standards, business operations, management systems, codes of conduct, ethics, and customs etc. Management is the accumulation of culture; on the other hand, it can create a culture. The management techniques used by American and Chinese organizations can be the same but they look at them from different orientations and management philosophies. The fundamental reason is that the two countries’ management style is based on different cultures.

There is an impact of culture on the organizational structure. The formation of management concepts and organizational structures in different countries ties with their cultures and in accordance with their cultural development. In the US, the organizational structure is more flat and has fewer levels than the organizational structure that Chinese organizations set up. Organizations in China usually do top to bottom decision-making. All the important decisions are made by the superior level and the views of the lower level are always not be adopted, while in the US the decision-making often begins from bottom and moves to the top level, though sometimes the lower level has the opportunity to provide feedback if the decision-making is not entirely from the top to the bottom. From a cultural perspective, the concept of equality in the US society is more ubiquitous than in China and the decision-making process is more democratic.

An efficient project management team is vital for a project’s success. Projects can also be impacted by cultural differences. Some multinational enterprises have already realized that the importance of the project team. In Aycan and Tenrence’s (2001) research regarding cross-culture management, they compared single-cultural and multi-cultural teams. The
Differences between the US and Chinese Conflict Management in Project Management

Performance of the international project team was either very low or very high, one of the two extremes. In the international project team, culture and management are strongly affiliated. If these two factors are managed properly, they will have a synergistic effect, but if not, there is great risk to the project.

Research Findings

It is apparent that people from different cultures use different styles of dealing with conflict. Generally speaking, the findings from this research show that conflict management styles differ as cultural values differ. They also shed some new light on theories and practices about the relationship between cultural values and conflict resolution styles, especially such a relationship in a cross-cultural relationship. Without culture-sensitive knowledge, conflicting parties from different cultural backgrounds can not learn to uncover the ethnocentric lenses they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural conflict situation. Without knowledge, people can not have an accurate perspective and interpretation of a conflict situation from the other’s cultural stand point of view. Knowledge here refers to developing in-depth understanding of important intercultural communication principles that can help to manage culture-based conflict competently. (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, 1988)

Chang and Holt have posed challenges to previous studies. They have pointed out that some images endorsed in studies of Chinese people being passive are not always true. They then called for further study on Chinese people’s cultural orientations as culture changes along with the society. Chang and Holt (1996) found Chinese are seldom quiet, they are often
noisy; they are seldom meek, they are often competitive and argumentative; they are seldom passive, they are often active. Chinese people, as the Americans, tend to adopt different kinds of strategies towards different people and in different situations. Therefore one can’t lose sight of the lively and colorful aspects of the Chinese culture, particularly as these aspects are manifested in their daily verbal strategies. A more profound and complete exploration is suggested. The findings that culture plays a role in the adoption of different conflict management styles are significant in cross-cultural communication and conflict management. This evidence can be of help to people working in a multinational environment who must interact frequently and resolve conflicts with people from other cultures.

Implications for Project Management

When operating multinational projects, the organizational structure, technology, methods, and control programs are basically the same as a domestic project. In an international project the cultural backgrounds of team members are dissimilar, which makes diversity an important factor that can affect the whole project and create trouble for management. In this situation, understanding the different cultures becomes a precondition for enterprises to implement the international project team. Project managers of international project operations should:

- Analyze the problems and difficulties confronting the international project team
- Correctly treat cultural differences
- Understand cultural value and behavior orientations
- Coordinate dissimilarities of the economic and culture differences
Cultural conflict in international project teams is unavoidable. The project manager must correctly understand the causes of conflict and its appearance so that he or she can change passiveness into initiative and use conflict positively. In accordance with the project team’s actual characteristics, management may establish the innovative culture management pattern in order to consolidate and strengthen their competitive status thus guarantying the fulfillment of the project goals.

This study draws a picture of the American and the Chinese conflict management styles in project management. Some implications and directions can be drawn from this line of research.

*Selecting the appropriate conflict resolution style*

For Americans, dealing with conflict with Chinese or in Chinese culture should have the following knowledge: Conflict in China is thought to be threatening to interpersonal harmony and self-development. The Chinese people tend to integrate the issue and the person in conflict together, which makes them relationship-oriented in conflict management. Indirect strategy, such as avoiding, obliging, and compromising, are frequently used in conflict situation. Saving face is quite important in conflict situations. The conflict outcome is defined as productive when both conflict parties can claim win-win results on the face issue in addition to task agreement. Whereas, Chinese, dealing with conflict with Americans or in American culture should be aware of the following principles: conflict in America is viewed as a positive thing, generating new ideas and initiatives. American people tend to separate the issue and person involved in a conflict situation. Direct strategies, like integrating and
dominating are preferred strategies for Americans.

Project managers and project team members in intercultural corporations should attempt proactive dialogue when a conflict occurs and choose the appropriate conflict resolution style based on the specific application of them. The best way to deal with intercultural conflict is to stop it from escalating in the first place (Ting-Toomey, 2001). As the findings of this study shows, the integrating style is the most favorable choice for both the Chinese and the Americans when they handle a conflict. So when a conflict occurs, the conflicting parties should face it directly, with an open discussion. However, the key to ensure this open and successful discussion is that people enter the discussion with cultural sensitivity and respect. Only with trust and safety can the conflict be resolved successfully.

**Applying Constructive Conflict Management Skill**

Constructive conflict management refers to managing an intercultural conflict situation appropriately, effectively, and satisfactorily. To achieve that, the skills in the following three aspects in conflict situation are needed.

Mindful observation and listening: acquiring new information in a conflict management process means both conflict parties have to learn to observe and listen mindfully to each other even when disagreeing. They have to learn to “Chá Yán Guān Sè”, referring to observe and listen to the sounds, tones, gestures, body movement, and silence in given conflict situation and try to interpret the underlying implications (Ting–Toomey, 2003). To be a mindful interpreter of intercultural conflict, one must develop an all-round point of view of the critical factors in a conflict episode. “Mindfulness means attending to one’s internal assumptions,
cognitions, and emotions and, at the same time, becoming attuned to the other’s conflict assumptions, cognitions, and emotions. We also need to be open to novel or unfamiliar behavior. To be mindful of intercultural differences, we have to learn to see the unfamiliar behavior from a nonjudgmental perspective” (Ting-Toomey, 1999). To act mindfully, we should learn to: a) Take behavior or information contained in the conflict situation as novel or fresh. b) View a conflict situation from several perspectives. c) Attend to the specific conflict context and the person involved. d) Try to perceive and experience conflicts from the other conflict party’s point of view. Actually, we cannot learn to be suddenly mindful during a conflict episode. Mindfulness is cultivated through daily experiences and everyday interactions.

Problem-Solving Skills: to develop constructive conflict management skills, a person should first clarify the conflict setting. This step aims to have a clear understanding of the conflict positions and goals. The second step is to describe the key conflict problem in specific and understandable way. The final step is integration. This phase includes: a) showing cooperative and mutual-interest intentions; b) generating creative solutions through a wide range of cultural point of views; c) evaluating the positive and negative aspects of each solution and select the best one that is applicable to both parties.

Developing Interaction Adaptability: there is no fixed pattern in conflict interaction process. The key in any constructive conflict management is to be flexible and not be locked into one set of behavioral and thinking patterns. It means that sometimes, we need to modify, even change our conflict goals, perceptions, and behaviors to meet the needs of specific situation. By doing this, polarized views on the conflict problem may be softened.
Actually, the objective in practicing conflict management skills is to display basic human respect even when disagreeing. It is believed that human respect is the starting point for any productive intercultural conflict management.

*Developing the Cross-culture Knowledge on Conflict Management*

It is vital that the project team members in an international project, especially the project manager, should understand cross-cultural concepts. Communication in the conflict process is viewed as dissatisfying when the conflict parties are not willing to deal with the conflict openly and honestly. When no tangible goals are reached or no plan of action is developed, the conflict outcome is perceived as unproductive in American culture. Appropriate knowledge of conflict management differences between different cultures and the reasons behind them may minimize the culture shock and prevent the conflict from escalating. In translating this knowledge into competent conflict practice, one needs to practice mindful thinking to manage the conflict constructively and satisfactorily.

To work smoothly and communicate effectively with project team members from different cultures, American expatriates need to make constant efforts to adapt to the predominant ways of conflict management to the local Chinese culture, even though they do not have to change their cultural values dramatically. Of course, the local Chinese need to adapt themselves to the ways that conflict is managed in the American culture as well.

Project management requires the art of conflict resolution and communication. In the multinational environment, people from different cultures should acknowledge the differences between different cultures. Only when people from different cultures share a
respectful attitude to each other can the conflicts occurring within an intercultural environment be resolved. Cultural sensitivity and mutual respect are crucial for resolution of conflicts. The project management team of a multinational corporation should try to create opportunities for employees to approach culturally different colleagues to inquire about their background in a culturally-sensitive manner. Cross-cultural conflicts may be better managed if parties understand what the other party expects at each phase of the conflict process.

Conclusion

Through this research, it becomes clear that members of American culture and Chinese culture view their world through different lenses, attach different meanings to particular conflicts, and have different standards on how to behave in conflict situations. This makes intercultural encounters from the two cultures very susceptible to misunderstandings, particularly in conflict episodes and often leads to escalating irritation. Since intercultural encounters today are more common than before, we have to work with intercultural conflict in a constructive way.
Differences between the US and Chinese Conflict Management in Project Management

References


Intercultural Communication Studies, (7), 17-40.


